VISUALIZING BODIES: ABORTION AND EMBODIMENT IN THE WORKS OF VARDA, SCIAMMA, AND DIWAN

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[In loving memory of Maryann and Tucker]

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SUMMARY

This thesis explores the unique portrayal of abortion in French-language cinema, specifically focusing on three films: *L'une chante, l'autre pas* (1977) by Agnès Varda, *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) by Céline Sciamma, and *L'événement* (2021) by Audrey Diwan. The thesis investigates how these films depict the embodied female experience, emphasizing the physicality and emotional complexity of abortion as well as the sense of isolation that accompanies the possession of a female body. Varda's hybrid documentary/narrative film is noted for its revolutionary portrayal of women's resilience and agency, Sciamma's work challenges traditional gender dynamics through the emphasis of a mutual gaze and of artistic expression, and Diwan's film provides a raw and intimate look at the desperation and isolation associated with illegal abortion in 1960s France. Through an in-depth analysis of each of these films I argue that the collective choice to discuss and/or depict abortion on screen challenges traditional representations of women in cinema and nominates these films as advocates for greater visibility and understanding of women's bodily autonomy.

INTRODUCTION

Feminine bodies depicted in popular art are enigmatic by nature. On the one hand, women are represented as angelic, reflective surfaces free of imperfections and infinitely available to bounce back whatever men have projected onto them. Conversely, the active potential of feminine bodies poses a threat to this utopic ideal and therefore must be hidden away along with all their shameful and dirty processes. In the world of cinema, film theorists such as Laura Mulvey have argued that female characters exist silently in one of these two places: harmless perfection, or shameful imperfection (Mulvey). However, a handful of artists and theorists alike have begun to explore narrative structures and cinematic techniques that circumvent these restrictive and objectifying norms through the concept of embodiment (Williams, Marks, Brey). This approach, rooted in phenomenology, suggests a cinema in which viewers are not just passive observers but are physically and emotionally engaged with the media they watch. This active engagement, promoted by the depiction of embodiment on screen, can help overcome the limitations of traditional identification that often occurs during passive media consumption. The embodied female experience in particular scarcely graces the screen of mainstream narrative cinema due to the restrictive conventions of such a male-dominated industry, but the few artists who do choose to place feminine bodies in the spotlight have given us the rare opportunity to explore how embodiment on the big screen can begin to change the way that we view and talk about women in life and in art.

For this thesis, I will present three French-language films that participate in this phenomenon, each of which feature scenes that discuss and/or portray abortion in strikingly

different ways: *L'une chante l'autre pas* (1977) by Agnès Varda, *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) by Céline Sciamma, and the primary inspiration for this paper, *L'événement* (2021) by Audrey Diwan. In the following chapters, I'd like to unpack the ways in which these varying portrayals serve to influence audience perception of the female body and the process of abortion itself, taking into account both historical context as well as philosophical theories surrounding gender and perception. Through an analysis of these three representations of abortion on screen, I aim to demonstrate how possessing a female body can be a profoundly and dangerously isolating experience, especially in a society that has historically enforced a rhetoric of shame and favored the quiet, which is imperative to acknowledge in order to start building communities that value the needs of all members regardless of gender.

1.1 Historical Context

The term 'abortion' refers to the deliberate termination of a human pregnancy, a practice that has existed for centuries in virtually all cultures of the world. The first recorded evidence of contraceptive techniques appeared in the Egyptian Ebers Papyrus in 1550 BCE, while the oldest known visual representations of abortion can be found on the walls of Angkor Wat in Cambodia, dating back to 1150 AD (Potts Campbell). Understanding the range of consequences that accompany childbirth and that persist throughout motherhood, it is evident that women across the globe have always been conscious of contraceptive practices and fertility regulation. In early modern France, while the deliberate termination of a pregnancy was considered illegal and punishable under royal law (most notably in the 17th and 18th centuries), aristocrats and peasant women alike still sought to control their fertility in a variety of ways. Some women used abortifacient herbal

remedies or medications, “abound in history and in contemporary folk culture,” to bring on delayed menstruation, while others opted for more invasive procedures that involved either the puncture of the embryotic sac using a probe of some sort, or a two-part technique comprised of ‘fixing the uterus’ manually with the insertion of fingers and hands followed by the application of pressure on the abdomen to encourage expulsion of the fetus (Potts Campbell). Because the practice of abortion was both illegal and taboo even in private conversation, it is difficult to identify the techniques employed exclusively in France. However, through an exploration of broader, Western European texts, we can begin to understand the consensus surrounding procreative gender roles that in turn influenced the necessity for and practice of contraception in the Early Modern Period. At the time, concerns regarding unregulated growth and overconsumption of resources sparked conversations about population control, and as the physical, mental, emotional, and not to mention financial threat that childbirth and motherhood posed still persisted, it is easy to understand how the underground abortion scene eventually grew into “a veritable industry” by the mid-19th century, an industry that went on to serve the women of France all the way until the legalization of abortion in 1975 (Potts and Campbell).

The 20th century was by far the most turbulent with regard to abortion in both cultural and political contexts in France. After World War I, “at a high point of nationalistic depopulation anxiety,” restrictive laws against the termination of pregnancy were passed in both 1920 and 1923 (preceded by the Napoleonic Code of 1810 which marked the official criminalization of abortion in France) (Oliver-Powell 18). These laws required “prison terms and fines not only for performing or obtaining an abortion or selling contraceptives, but also for giving information about "procedures susceptible of preventing

pregnancy," aiding a woman in obtaining an abortion, or selling implements to perform the procedure" (Stetson 278). At the time, there was also a major disconnect between the public and private spheres when it came to opinions about population growth, as individual family units subscribed to Neo-Malthusian overconsumption concerns and voluntarily restricted their own fertility in spite of the nation's encouragement of reproduction. This led to the development of government-funded programs that incentivized higher rates of childbirth and celebrated the mothers who were committed to " 'fight' for the interests of their nation" (Oliver-Powell 19). New women's rights organizations began to spring up as early as the 1950s, and while these organizations did manage to catch a small victory in 1967 with the passing of the Neuwirth Act legalizing contraception (but not the advertisement of it), it wasn't until the 1970s when political reform began to pick up speed.

First, there was the *Manifeste des 343*, a petition published in *Le Nouvel observateur* signed by 343 culturally prominent French figures proclaiming that they had each undergone an illegal abortion (Oliver-Powell 14). Signatories of this manifesto included figures such Simone de Beauvoir, Catherine Deneuve, Marguerite Duras, and Agnès Varda among many others. This open letter to the French republic made it clear that the women of this country would continue to seek out abortions regardless of the legislation in place and called for the legalization of abortion which would provide safer, more hygienic spaces for women to receive reproductive healthcare. In the following year, France saw a major turning point in the fight for abortion rights with the infamous Bobigny trial. In 1972, a 16-year-old girl by the name of Marie-Claire was raped and involuntarily impregnated. Her mother along with two other women helped her find the means to get an abortion, soon after which all four of them were charged and put on trial. Gisèle Halimi,

one of the signatories of the *343* and co-founder of the abortion reform group *Choisir*, served as the primary defense attorney for this trial and built her case upon the grounds that the 1920 law disproportionately affected working-class women (Hallet and Miller). The judge eventually deemed the 1920 law inadequate and inapplicable, acquitting Marie-Claire and enormously reducing the sentences of the other women involved. While this trial did not create immediate legislative change, its explosive presence in the media remarkably altered the way that people spoke about abortion, and in the following years, abortion prosecution declined significantly as well (Hallet and Miller). Following the Bobigny trial, the Veil Law was passed in 1974 which greatly improved access to contraception, and shortly after that, abortion was itself legalized in 1975. From this point forward, France continued to pass legislation that would expand access to sex education, contraceptive methods, and family planning resources, and in 2024, France made history when it became the first country in the world to codify the right to abortion in their Constitution.

1.2 Literature Review

Cinema is an inherently visual art form. Since the inclusion of sound, watching a film has become an increasingly immersive experience and it has become more and more difficult to discern from real life as time goes by. 3-D and 4-D film screenings attempt to venture even further, testing the limits of more immersive, multi-sensory experiences. But at its core, cinema is an art for the eyes, and given its unique capability to control the dimensions of space and time, this visual art is the ideal platform to produce what Laura Mulvey describes as “an illusion cut to the measure of desire” (17).

In philosophy, vision has frequently been privileged as one of the more "cerebral" senses, used as the basis for understanding our existence within the world around us and amidst the people who surround us. Aristotle and Plato both associated sight with reason which elevated its status among the other senses. French theorists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon, and Simone de Beauvoir have each built upon each other's ideas surrounding 'subject' and 'object,' relying heavily on the perception of ourselves as well as that of the Other, underlining the foundations that these theories have in vision. However, given its capacity for abstraction, vision also lends itself to systems of collection and control such as surveillance and capitalism (Marks). In other words, because sight allows us to perceive people and objects from a much greater distance than other senses such as touch, taste, or smell, we are able to separate ourselves from the world to a much higher degree and often instrumentalize vision in the interest of mastery. It is important to remember here that some level of separation from our bodies is necessary in order to function both as individuals and collectively. For example, if we were constantly attuned to the processes within our bodies–such as the way that we breathe or digest–we wouldn't have the capacity to walk from place to place or even talk on the phone. A certain degree of "alienation" allows us to experience both first-person and third-person perspectives simultaneously (Leder). Therefore, it makes sense that most cultures around the world make room for a dominance of vision at least to some degree. However, some critics such as Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) and Fatimah Tobing Rony (1996) have pointed out a "specifically Western character of visuality as one that objectifies others, isolates self from others, and attempts to master external and internal worlds." (Marks 133). The privileging of vision over the other senses particularly in Western contexts is often referred

to as ocularcentrism, an epistemological bias that has been considerably scrutinized by phenomenologists and feminist theorists alike. Both groups argue that the body is crucial in the act of perception. For example, in her recent text on the female gaze, Iris Brey points out that "perception is an embodied activity", reminding us that "the eye is not separate from the rest of the body" (42).

In her 2000 book titled *The Skin of the Film*, Laura Marks dives into a relatively new conversation surrounding tactile epistemologies or, in other words, sensuous knowledges; something that she and other researchers have claimed is less valued in Western, capitalist societies in comparison to the visual, which allows for more abstraction and domination. Citing theorists from the Frankfurt School of critics such as Benjamin, Horkheimer and Adorno, Marks introduces the concept of *mimesis,* explaining that it "is a form of yielding to one's environment, rather than dominating it, and thus offers a radical alternative to the controlling distance from the environment so well served by vision" (140). Through mimesis, one is capable of interacting and collaborating with the world as opposed to the unfeeling and detached experience that vision provides. Marks then goes on to explain how all of this pertains to cinema, grounding her argument saying that "film is grasped not solely by an intellectual act but by the complex perception of the body as a whole", ultimately offering a "theory of embodied visuality" that reconsiders the practice of mimesis in a specifically cinematic context (145). This is the foundation upon which I shall briefly explain the concept of 'embodied spectatorship'. Grounded in phenomenology and widely supported by feminist film theorists, embodied spectatorship describes a specific genre of viewing experience during which the spectator not only remains mentally active in their consumption of a piece of media but also physically active, practicing

mimesis of the characters before them and allowing their body to participate in the immersive experience of watching a film.

Linda Williams explores this concept of embodied spectatorship in her 1991 article "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess" where she combines pornography, horror, and melodrama to create a new subcategory of film that she refers to as 'body genres'. Williams justifies this seemingly odd categorization by pointing out that "the success of these genres is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen," for example, how much you cry watching a chick-flick or how much you scream or shudder while watching a slasher (4). This mimicry of sex, violence and emotion is almost an involuntary reaction from the body of the spectator, for with these films, there is a marked lack of distance from the events happening on-screen and, as Williams puts it, "a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion" (5). In her article Williams also addresses the fact that a majority of these 'body genre' films opt to represent excess through the medium of the female body, illustrating that "in each of these genres the bodies of women figured on the screen have functioned traditionally as the primary *embodiments* of pleasure, fear, and pain" (4). These films disproportionately favor the exhibition and victimization of female characters and, as Williams argues, this almost-too-obvious sexual imbalance serves as an explanation for the notably low cultural status shared by each of these genres.

The omnipresence of female bodies across almost all subgenres of excess calls attention to the scarcity of non-sensationalized depictions of the embodied female experience in mainstream cinema. This lack of representation is perpetuated by a collective fascination with and apprehension toward the mystery of feminine anatomy, and in the

male-dominated industry of cinema, there have been few opportunities to explore the importance of depicting female bodies in the messy context of their true nature. In this thesis, through the analysis of three different films which each present either discussions or representations of abortion within their respective narratives, I propose that each directors' unique employment of embodiment and haptic imagery challenges traditional representations of women's bodies in cinema and works to de-mystify the embodied female experience by opening conversations surrounding the necessity for reproductive healthcare.

L'UNE CHANTE, L'AUTRE PAS

Figure 1 – Pomme's singing group Orchidée performs a song about pregnancy while wearing fake stomachs

Agnès Varda was always very vocal in her activism for women's rights and reproductive healthcare, representing one of the 343 signatories of the *Manifeste des 343* through which various activists and culturally prominent French women proclaimed themselves "criminals of a particularly gendered nature" as they had each undergone what was still technically against the law at the time: an abortion (Oliver-Powell 14). Set against the backdrop of a society on the brink of change and filmed at a time when France's legalization of abortion was still fresh in everyone's minds, Agnès Varda's 1977 film *L'une chante, l'autre pas* explores a reality that is characterized by fluidity and choice (Figure 1). As she blurs the line between documentary and fiction, jumping between past and present, Varda presents an illuminating perspective on the embodied female experience that refuses to linger too long on the negatives. In addition, by inserting herself in the narrative, Varda bridges the gaps between the functions of creator, art, and spectator, inviting us to

participate actively in the viewing experience ourselves. This heightened sense of embodiment lends itself to a deeper understanding of the characters' emotions as well as their corporeality, and as the two women in the film reflect on their diverging and converging lives, audiences too begin to reflect on the multiplicity of the female experience as a whole.

2.1 From the Shadow to the Light

Beginning in 1962 and signing off by 1976, *L'une chante, l'autre pas* tells the story of two young women who have taken drastically different paths in life but still maintain an unyielding love and appreciation for one another, a love that is primarily expressed through letters and postcards until the joyful moment when their lives cross paths once more. In the beginning, we first meet Pomme (Valérie Mairesse) at the age of 17 and she is already a force to be reckoned with, questioning everything from the lessons of her professors to the teachings of her father. Suzanne (Thérèse Liotard), on the other hand, is 22 and already the mother of two children, living with a broke photographer and just barely scraping by. At one point in time, the two women were neighbors, but the catalyst of their deeper relationship occurs shortly after the film begins, at which point Pomme helps Suzanne find a way to end an unwanted third pregnancy that would have likely pushed her over the edge financially. Then, the women go their separate ways again.

Ten years later in 1972, Pomme and Suzanne find one another by chance outside of the Bobigny courthouse at the peak of the historic trial that eventually led to the decriminalization of abortion in France in 1975 (Figure 2). Adding to the abrupt and surprising realism of this scene, Gisèle Halimi herself, who served as the primary defense

attorney in the Bobigny trial, makes a guest appearance and lets a few protesters inside the barricades, insisting that the case needs to be witnessed. It is in this moment that audiences realize: Varda has not simply chosen the Women's Movement as a distant foundation upon which the story would be built, she instead opts to weave significant truths of the movement into the lives of the characters in such a way that blends the genres of documentary and fiction together.

Figure 2 – Outside the Bobigny courthouse

From *Jane B. par Agnès V.* (1988) to *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000), Varda's documentaries almost always include some element of fiction to blur the lines of reality. She admits the intentionality of this choice in an interview with Ruth McCormick: "I conceive of the film (*L'une chante*) as a painting with a background and a foreground. In the foreground are the figures of the two women, while the background is a very special and specific documentary about the laws and institutions regarding women's rights in France between 1962 and 1976" (McCormick 29). These generic layers add a level of complexity to the film that necessitates greater audience contemplation, forcing viewers to

remain alert and to watch actively rather than consuming passively, invoking . This is again underlined by Varda's employment of what Ruth Hottell refers to as a cinema of "subjective inclusion" (Hottell 60).

Throughout the film in addition to many of her other works, if you look or listen close enough, you can find traces of Agnès both within and outside of the diegesis. In *L'une chante,* Varda's disembodied voice is present throughout as the unidentified third-person narrator, while her hands make brief appearances of their own in transitional shots that feature maps or postcards. In addition to these fragmented inclusions of herself, Varda also brought in both of her children (Mathieu Demy and Rosalie Varda) to play some minor roles near the end of the film (Figure 3). These instances of self-insertion both cement her connection to the piece and reflect her own belief that "the filmmaker is always implicated in her/his work and should admit that involvement, that subjective stance, rather than perpetuate the myth of artistic objectivity" (Hottell 60). In her films, Varda demonstrates the idea that to admit to the presence of self in one's own work is to also, in turn, recognize the existence of the spectator/Other as opposed to maintaining a continued ignorance towards it/us/them. By including herself in the film, Varda invites her spectators in as well, puts them on an equal plane, and explores a cinema of interaction, a two-way street not just for scholars but for anyone who walks into the theater. This "inclusive spectatorship" model provides an invitation for audiences to begin the process of questioning systems themselves (Hottell).

Figure 3 – Rosalie Varda in the role of Suzanne's daughter in the Epilogue

Given her avid involvement in women's rights activism, Varda's decision to produce a film that addresses abortion and other reproductive rights is not surprising in the least. However, a number of reviews and critiques published in response to the film's release reveal widespread disappointment regarding how quickly the women in the film overcame the 'trauma' of having to get an abortion. In her article, Melissa Oliver-Powell points out that "the critical appetite for representations of female suffering seem to forget that pain is neither the only nor the most significant way of experiencing femininity," calling attention to other emotional responses to trauma such as anger, laughter, and even indifference (38). Oliver-Powell explains the reasoning behind this disconnect, saying that:

> "In approaching discussions of gendered injustice, it is common for feminist writers and activists to leverage pathos as a rhetorical strategy. While suffering can be a highly effective and galvanizing expression of oppression, such discourses also run

> the risk of producing excessive depictions of victimhood, which can displace the capacity for action from the subject of hardship onto the privileged oppressor" (15).

In her article, Oliver-Powell notes a trend in cinematic representations of abortion prior to *L'une chante*, one that is based in the solicitation of "an almost pornographic masochism" that perpetuates the all-too-familiar idealized representations of women as powerless objects in need of help (Oliver-Powell, 38). In her film, Varda rejects all of this. The women of *L'une chante* are resilient, successful, and happy in spite of the hardships they've each had to face along the way. Varda explicitly chose to overlook the pain and suffering that often come with pregnancy, abortion, and motherhood not to dismiss or de-value them but rather to emphasize the women's agency and self-determination, de-sensationalizing the embodied female experience as a result. This is especially explicit in the scenes of Pomme in Amsterdam. As the instrumental for Pomme's song begins and we hear her voice explaining how her companions (this "family of women") inspired her to begin writing, the camera pans horizontally across the faces of each woman in the room. In the same way that the trips Varda took to Amsterdam in preparation for this film brought about complex and nuanced emotions, so too does the atmosphere in this scene of the film. As Oliver-Powell puts it: "At no point during the Amsterdam episode does the mood of the film commit entirely to either pain or joy", the women are simply in a period of anticipation, waiting (Oliver-Powell, 34). One woman wipes away a few tears, another knits passively in the seat next to Pomme. Some hold conversations, others do not. The women shown in this scene reflect multiplicity as it pertains to the embodied female experience, rejecting the dominant narrative that tends to rope all women's lives into one universal experience (Figure 4). Varda invokes this multiplicity at other points in the film as well, most notable

during the scenes where Pomme's band is performing to an audience of strangers. In each of these scenes, the camera will change subjects momentarily to capture a few back-to-back close-up shots of the women in the audience as if we are flipping through the faces in a photo album and reminiscing about the journeys they have all been on. In an interview, Varda expressed that for *L'une chante*, "[She] tried to show women moving from the shadow into the light" (McCormick 29). Each of the women depicted in the film have had to face a range of difficult experiences, but it's their ability to go on, to continue living life and experiencing joy that Varda manages to highlight in this film.

Figure 4 – Pomme sings about her abortion experience while on a boat in the canals of Amsterdam, surrounded by others going through the same

2.2 More Than a Body

While neither of the abortions in *L'une chante* take place on-screen, the underlying backdrop of the Women's Movement paired with the casual, progressive dialogue present throughout the film make this work a unique talking point in the larger conversation surrounding abortion in film. The first abortion occurs at the very beginning; Pomme learns

that Suzanne is pregnant with a third child and is terrified of the implications, despite not having the means to deal with it herself. Pomme decides to help her get an abortion and lies to her parents so that she can acquire the necessary funds for Suzanne's journey to Switzerland. Gone and back within only a few minutes of run time, the only indication the audience has that Suzanne succeeded in getting an abortion is when she pauses briefly on the steps back up to her apartment. Later in Amsterdam, symbols of medicine captured here and there make this instance of abortion somewhat more pronounced—women waiting in hospital cots, chairs with stirrups—but in a similar fashion to the first abortion, we move on, always looking towards the next chapter. In her article, Oliver-Powell argues that "suffering does not occupy the throne of feminine focus" and that "if critics feel we are too distanced from the characters' anguish or question the absence of desperate misery, it is because we are not being asked for pity" (38). In this world, in the reality of *L'une chante, l'autre pas*, abortion is simply another part of the embodied female experience, shared by many, and it does not always commandeer a woman's life.

Figure 5 – Suzanne finally tells Pomme about the botched abortion she received ten years ago, the complications of which left her infertile

Much later in the film, as the two main characters are catching up with one another, Suzanne admits that instead of going to get a legitimate abortion from a doctor in Switzerland, she spent most of Pomme's money to pay off her bills and used the rest to hire a *faiseuse d'anges* (angel maker) to conduct a clandestine abortion instead, a choice which ultimately left her infertile due to complications (Figure 5). In the beginning of this scene, Suzanne maintains a visage of nonchalance, lighting a cigarette and slouching onto the bed to join her friend, but after a beat Pomme whispers "What a mess…" and the trauma of Suzanne's memory comes flooding back in causing her to tear up. Then, the women change the subject and start talking about how excited they are for Pomme to give birth soon. This scene depicts a beautifully vulnerable conversation between two friends reflecting on the restrictions of one and the opportunities of the other. The pain and suffering felt by Suzanne is now carried between the both of them, and the joyful potential of Pomme's unborn child will be shared as well. The characters acknowledge the emotions brought on by both circumstances and rejoice in the thought that whatever else is to come, they will face it together. The range of conversations surrounding abortion (as well as pregnancy, parenthood, and adult sex lives among other topics) within this film serves as a testament to the multiplicity of the embodied female experience, actively working to inform audiences of the plurality of feminine bodies and lives and to highlight the necessity for healthcare, community, and conversation.

PORTRAIT DE LA JEUNE FILLE EN FEU

In the ever-growing conversation surrounding the male gaze and—more recently—the female gaze, one point that has remained central is the dichotomy between activity and passivity. In her 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey explores the philosophy behind the male gaze, using the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan to explain the scopophilic and narcissistic elements at war with one another inside the (supposedly male) spectator's mind in the event of viewing a female figure on screen. She explains that "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female," pointing out how men have traditionally kept a very firm grasp on the role of 'bearer of the look' (Mulvey 11). This kind of viewership is distinctively unidirectional and reinforces a significant power hierarchy, effectively confiscating any opportunity for female characters to take up space or to have a voice of their own. As can be seen in Mulvey's dissection of the sexual imbalance reflected in traditional narrative cinema as well as the many follow-up theories that have expanded upon her work (Williams 1991, Schoonover et al. 2016, Brey 2020), feminists in the world of film creation and criticism alike have been striving to call attention to and combat the pronounced scarcity of equal representation, continually searching for ways to grant female characters the agency to express themselves and, as we will see in *Portrait,* grounding these characters in their worldly bodies (Figure 6).

Figure 6 – Marianne dries off by the fire after salvaging her canvases that fell overboard on her way to the estate

Beginning in the 1990s and continuing on into the early 2000s, influences from phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty permeated amongst film theorists, a theoretical shift through which the body came to play an integral role in the viewing experience, acknowledging that vision enables our bodies to interact with the world around us. This new idea allowed film theorists to explore beyond the psychoanalytic theories of classical identification. A newer application of phenomenology and theories of embodiment has been the search for a potential 'female gaze' in opposition to the previously theorized male one. Iris Brey's book on this very subject addresses how she was inspired by the recent re-introduction of the body in cinema as it provided a new theoretical framework for understanding films that exhibited embodied female subjectivity. She emphasizes that the female gaze is not simply something produced by a woman, nor is it something that presents an objectifying image of male characters, but rather "adopts the point of view of a female character to embrace her experience" and to consciously *feel* what's happening on the screen (Brey 9). This kind of active and embodied spectatorship is achieved by films

that invite audiences to occupy space alongside the characters rather than observe them from a distance, a technique that is exemplified in Céline Sciamma's 2019 film *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*. With an intentionally minimalistic soundscape and comfortable, andante pacing, Sciamma's film is one that you step fully into, not only to immerse yourself in the setting but also to join the party of women on screen: to go on walks with them, play cards together, read together, and have a conversation. What makes this film unique is the space that it allows through stylistic choices such as the omission of a musical score and the enforcement of equal framing, all of which work together to create a space in which the women of the story can stretch out their arms and take up as much space as they need. This liberty is extended to their bodies as well, and in this chapter I maintain that the corporeality of the film, represented through its portrayal of sexuality and abortion, works to eliminate taboos surrounding the flesh of the female body on screen and represents an imperative necessity for female embodied subjectivity in the world of artistic creation.

3.1 Women as Bearer of the Look

Set in the late 18th century, *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* tells the story of Marianne (Noémie Merlant), a young female artist who has been hired by a Countess in Brittany to come and paint the portrait of her daughter, Héloïse (Adèle Haenel), who is soon to be married off to some unknown Milanese nobleman. The dilemma, though, is that Héloïse refuses to sit for it. So, Marianne must pose as her 'companion' instead, and during their quiet walks along the coast, she studies her, memorizing her features, and quickly sketching down as many bits and pieces as she can grasp before Héloïse has a chance to run away again (Figure 7). Despite the fact that she only has a few disembodied pieces of a person here and there, Marianne continues her work in secret, adding any newly discovered

features to the portrait whenever she can. Unfortunately, this Frankenstein of a portrait is composed of parts, not a whole, and as a result, the eventually completed portrait seems to fall short of capturing Héloïse's true character, and Marianne ends up destroying her own work. The following attempts do not prove to be fruitful either as Marianne continues to find particular difficulty with capturing Héloïse's face, in part because her complexity as a character deepens as the story goes on, and her thunderstorm of a personality is rather difficult to corral into a flat, two-dimensional space.

Figure 7 – One of the many attempts made to secretly sketch the different features of Héloïse, none of which proved to be fruitful

Sartre claimed that the gaze can only ever be unidirectional, writing that "we cannot perceive the world and at the same time apprehend a look fastened upon," we must instead inhabit a singular existence (347). He expresses that while perception is an action, *to look at*, the apprehension of said 'look' is simply a passive "consciousness of *being looked at*," although I would argue that his use of the word 'apprehend' rather than something more passive such as 'receive' automatically implies activity to some degree (Sartre 347). Mulvey supports this interpretation in her essay and expands upon it by assigning exclusive genders to these respective roles, describing a space that is inherently ordered by a sexual

imbalance. This perspective is rather restrictive though, and it fails to consider the possibility that the object or the looked-at may in fact be looking back. In the introduction to his book *The Order of Things* (1966), Michel Foucault ponders the complicated potential for a multi-directional gaze, using the curious example of *Las Meninas*, a 17th century work by the Spanish painter Diego Velázquez. The painting features the artist himself off-center and mid-project as he works on the portrait of the King and Queen of Spain, the figures of whom are only visible in the distant mirror at the back of the room (Figure 8). What confounds Foucault, and what makes this painting unlike any other, is Velázquez's unconventional choice to make us, the spectators, the recipient of the gaze. In this space, the direction of vision has been flipped 180 degrees and we find ourselves unwillingly in the place of the King and Queen, subjected to the eyes of everyone else in the room. Foucault attempts to explain this seemingly impossible phenomenon by saying that "in this precise but neutral place, the observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange…subject and object, the spectator and the model, reverse their roles to infinity" (5). It is important to note here that the theory of the unidirectional male gaze applies to more than just film. Before the creation of cinema, a painting or image of a person granted onlookers unauthorized access to their likeness, offering up the scopophilic pleasure of seeing or knowing a person without ever having to interact with them in the real world. The otherwise three-dimensional individuals captured in these works are trapped in a passive and two-dimensional space, incapable of hiding, or speaking, or looking back. And so, when the figures in *Las Meninas* appear to break the fourth wall, reclaiming their agency, viewers of the painting are forced to reconcile with the penetrative nature of their own gaze being reflected back. Due to long-standing conventions within the realm of art

consumption, audiences are understandably hesitant to cross into this unfamiliar territory of interaction as opposed to pure observation. Céline Sciamma, on the other hand, dives right in, and cleverly situates her narrative within the relationship of an artist and her muse, a relationship in which unidirectional observation is often the only expectation. The film initially subscribes to the traditional male gaze before eventually devolving into a unique cinema of equality and interaction, kickstarted by the muse looking back.

Figure 8 – *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez, 1656

Ultimately, Marianne must admit her betrayal to Héloïse, who then surprisingly declares that she will agree to sit for a new attempt, likely with the hope that a second chance will allow Marianne to capture her soul and not just her anatomy. As the two begin the process once more, this time face-to-face, we are met with an intriguing bit of dialogue that is quite reminiscent of Foucault's own ruminations. In this scene, as Marianne works on Héloïse's portrait, she begins to describe the subtle quirks that she's come across during

her time spent observing her elusive subject and attempting to capture her mannerisms, finishing by telling her: “I wouldn’t like to be in your place.” Unsuspectingly, Héloïse immediately reciprocates with her own list of habits that she’s observed in Marianne, revealing that she has been actively looking back, reflecting the gaze, the entire time. “We are in the same place. Exactly the same place,” she says. As Iris Brey puts it, “[Héloïse] makes her understand that, although she is the subject of the painting, she is also a being who looks," ultimately deconstructing the notion of the powerful artist and the powerless muse (57). In this moment, Héloïse calls Marianne to her side, forcing her to occupy the same objectified space and demonstrating that it hasn’t restricted her at all from seeing, thinking or feeling for herself. Throughout the entire film, Sciamma continues to emphasize the collaborative nature of the women’s relationship and the equality of the gaze in the same fashion. Opting to forgo the traditional *champ-contrechamp* (shot-reverse-shot) style of framing two characters, Sciamma chose instead to position the two women in the same shot as much as possible, placing them on an equal plane and eliminating even further the notions of subject/object or looker/bearer of the look (Figure 9).

Figure 9 – Héloïse watches Marianne as she tries to remember how to play a song on the harpsichord

3.2 Filming, Seeing, and Personifying the Body

Without the deafening and flattening presence of a unidirectional (male) gaze, the female characters are free to exist in an active space, an existence that is deeply ingrained in their heightened sense of physicality. I maintain that the bodies seen in *Portrait* possess a degree of truthfulness and tactility that is relatively foreign to mainstream cinema, at least when it comes to feminine corporeality: these bodies sweat and bleed and drool, they are constantly emphasizing the fact that they are living, breathing beings that take up three-dimensional space, and this emphasis works to further cement their existence and their capability to act within the narrative. Primary examples of this textured corporeality can be found in the romantic and erotic moments shared between Marianne and Héloïse, in which the haptic, close-up shots give an illusion of tactility, almost to the point where you can feel the brush of their skin. However, multiple analyses on the eroticism of this film have already been published (Fox 2020, Bradbury-Rance 2022, Potter 2022), and in this section, I'd like to focus on embodiment and haptic imagery through an analysis of Sophie's abortion.

Figure 10 – During her abortion, Sophie tries not to recoil in pain

While helping Marianne with her menstrual cycle, Sophie the housemaid (Luàna Bajrami) expresses that she's missed the last three of her own, claiming that she wanted to wait until the Countess was away to deal with it. Héloïse and Marianne aid her in her various attempts to clandestinely trigger a miscarriage (hanging from the ceiling, drinking a contraceptive brew, running for extensive distances) but none of the efforts are successful. Eventually, Sophie comes into contact with a local medicine woman, who agrees to help her get a 'proper' abortion. In the medicine woman's hut, accompanied by Marianne and Héloïse, Sophie lies down on a bed and prepares herself for the procedure. The most we see as the audience is Sophie's upper body attempting not to squirm as she quietly sobs in pain (Figure 10), but for the characters in the room, the abortion proves to be a deeply affective experience for every party involved. At first, Marianne attempts to look away, but Héloïse forces her to turn back and watch, emphasizing the importance of the moment, that it is worth witnessing (Figure 11). Later, when the three women return to the estate, the image is still imprinted on their brains and Héloïse, so taken by the whole experience, feels the need to recreate it. She calls for an impromptu live-painting session, posing as the medicine woman, hands already underneath Sophie's dress and looking to Marianne expectingly (Figure 12).

Figure 11 – Sophie's abortion from the perspective of Héloïse and Marianne who elected to come along for support

Figure 12 – Héloïse poses as the medicine woman in a recreation of the abortion still at the forefront of her mind

According to Sciamma, she took inspiration from French novelist Annie Ernaux when creating this scene, citing her saying that "there's no museum in the world with a portrait called 'The Abortion'," and describing how she is working to create a world in which there is (Olsen, LA Times). Women have been categorically excluded from the world of art and creation throughout history, in part due to the erasure of female artists but also thanks to an overarching ignorance towards the reality of feminine experience. Iris Brey addresses this scene briefly in her book, pointing out that:

> "Through this *mise en abyme* of the representation of abortion, Sciamma points to the cruel lack of representation of experiences linked exclusively to the female body. She also shows that knowledge of the female body is passed on in ways other than medical textbooks: in the arts" (77).

In this moment, Héloïse is in the middle of something that she knows is fading fast, and this beautiful world that she, Marianne, and Sophie have created together will soon be lost in history, without a record to be found. This realization of a fading sisterhood, paired with the overwhelmingly affective experience of watching Sophie's abortion led Héloïse to the conclusion that something must be done, that someone must capture this immediately (Figure 13). In addition to feeding the desire to hold onto something fleeting, the act of creation can also be seen as a way for women to reclaim their agency and resist the flatness imposed upon them, for bringing something new into the world is one of the ultimate ways to change the direction of the narrative.

The abortion shown in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* calls attention to the silent battle that women have been fighting for millennia, 'dealing' with their bodies behind closed doors and facing the storm all on their own. But, as we see in the film, when women are free of the suffocating, gendered silence imposed upon them, namely in the world of artistic creation, when they are given the space and the community to exist and interact with one another, a society that values the experiences of *all* its constituents seems increasingly within reach.

Figure 13 – Marianne paints the re-created scene before her, immortalizing the moment

L'ÉVÉNEMENT

Figure 14 – Anne's silent struggle for autonomy begins to take a toll on her education

While the narrative of abortion remains secondary to the main storylines of both *L'une chante, l'autre pas* and *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, for the case of Audrey Diwan's 2021 film, it is all-encompassing, and serves as a dangerously lucrative resolution to the main character's predicament. Based on the autobiographical memoir of French novelist Annie Ernaux, *L'événement* recounts the distressingly true story of how she herself sought to procure an illegal abortion in 1963 France. In the eyes of Anne, a promising, young, first-generation student in Angoulême, pregnancy poses a monumental threat to her future, and when she discovers what she's been subjected to, she searches high and low for any possible solution, quickly learning that this is a battle she must fight entirely on her own (Figure 14). None of her friends are willing to help resolve the issue for fear of conspiracy accusations, the young man who put her in this position in the first place expects her to deal with it on her own, and both of the gynecologists that she visits are too protective

of their medical licenses to get involved. In fact, one of the doctors, almost offended by her request, secretly prescribes a medication that reinforces the fetus rather than weakening it, further complicating her predicament. Thanks to the omnipresent threat of legal repercussions, Anne is pushed into a desperate and isolated existence, completely alone in her struggle, and must resort to stretched acquaintances and back-alley practitioners to fix her growing problem.

The weight of the potential consequences, paired with the quickly diminishing window of time, work to make this anxiety-inducing film rather difficult to watch, and several of the techniques employed by the director and cinematographer alike serve as amplifiers of this uncomfortable viewing experience. Of the three films examined in this paper, the abortion portrayed in *L'événement* is widely known as the most visceral and corporeal, holding audiences captive through the depiction of multiple real-time procedures and utilizing haptic, up-close-and-personal imagery to emphasize the flesh of each and every scene. In this chapter, I'd like to explore the ways in which these cinematic techniques intensify an embodied identification with the main character, in addition to the language used in reactionary critiques and reviews of the film, in an attempt to understand how this particular piece forces audiences to address any fears they may hold of the female body and to reconcile with the gendered seclusion societies around the globe have prescribed through politically polarizing morals and laws.

4.1 Too Close for Comfort

In the beginning, as the names of various production studios and distribution houses flash across a black screen, sound comes before sight and the film opens with voices

chattering in close quarters. Diwan acclimatizes our bodies one sense at a time as we step into the story before us, with vision arriving next in the form of a shaky close-up shot snuggled in between two bodies. Cigarette in one hand, safety pin in another, Anne and her friends are taking turns tightening each other's bras as they get ready to go out for the night (Figure 15). From the minimal soundscape occupied only by the voices inside the room and a few outside, to the bare shoulders and chests exposed and illuminated by the window above and the lamp in the back, it is apparent from the very beginning of the film that we as the audience have been invited into a private space. This is perhaps partially because it was inspired by a biographical text, making it difficult to step too far back from the events that are unfolding before us. However, the film ultimately achieves this unique level of intimacy through its particular choices of framing and camerawork.

Figure 15 – Anne's friend helps fasten her bra in the dormitory before they head out to go dancing together

Throughout the piece, the camera remains at eye-level with the main actress (Anamaria Vartolomei), and if she bends down, it mimics the movement, following her

gaze wherever it points. But in spite of this, the film is not inundated with point-blank shots of the main character's face. In fact, much of it is actually captured from behind and over her shoulder, but the camera does remain within an extremely close radius at all times, her body representing the axis around which it orbits. In addition, the camera almost never depicts Anne's full body within a single shot. If the director or cinematographer (Laurent Tangy) wants us to see a specific part of her body, it is either shown in the mirror or through a vertical pan, further restricting us to the bubble of vision that the main character has of herself (Figure 16). Audrey Diwan mentioned in an interview how precise they had to be with the staging in order to achieve this effect. She described how constraining it was to "follow the main character to the point where the camera had to move at the same pace and follow the slightest gesture in a choreography defined in advance," "It was lacework" she said (Libiot 25). The choice to have the camera follow and mimic Anne's every movement works to intensify the identification process already at work while viewing narrative film, a phenomenon explained by Laura Mulvey in her psychoanalytic interpretation of film spectatorship. In her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Mulvey explores our human "fascination with likeness and recognition," referencing the 'mirror stage' from Jacques Lacan's theory of development to demonstrate how the cinema has structures that both "allow temporary loss of the ego" and that "reinforce… the ego" (10). She claims that this complex phenomenon demands identification "with the object on the screen through the spectator's fascination with and recognition of his like" (10). In Diwan's adaptation, with the camera constantly hovering shakily just above Anne's shoulder, we are presented with the nearest equivalent to a point-of-view shot without feeling as if we are inhabiting the character's skin. In this way, we still recognize some level of separation in the process

of identification, and we end up experiencing the narrative alongside her, and not instead of her. In a review of the film, Barry Healy attempts to explain this phenomenon by expressing that “the viewer is with this woman every inch of the way, living her experience” (Healy). A different reviewer likened the experience to tagging along with an older sister and looking up to Anne as some sort of role model (Smyth). As these comments reveal, the viewing experience of this film in particular is uniquely immersive, almost participatory, indicating that these cinematographic choices invoke a more embodied viewership.

Figure 16 – Anne observes her body in the mirror, searching for any signs that might reveal or condemn her

The embodied spectatorial experience can also be amplified by the use of haptic imagery, as theorized by Laura Marks. Reflecting on the concept of ocularcentrism in her book *The Skin of the Film,* she explains that, whereas optical visuality "sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space," haptic looking "tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to

distinguish form so much as to discern texture" (Marks 162). The haptic image is thus a sensuous image, often a close-up, and haptic perception "privileges the material presence of the image" (Marks 163). The close-up camerawork employed throughout *L'événement* makes Anne appear physically close to us, as if we can almost reach out and touch her. This tactility is emphasized in scenes that take place outdoors with the sun illuminating her flyaways and the hair on the back of her neck. At other points in the film, light barely trickles in from the window high above, and the camera is so close to its subject(s) that the form is momentarily lost (Figure 17). Details such as pores, sweat, hair, and goosebumps take center stage, reminding audiences of Anne's bodily existence and firmly situating her among the tangible through the employment of sensual, haptic imagery (Marks). From these examples it is evident that the choice to use handheld cameras almost exclusively within arm's reach of the main character ultimately makes viewers feel more connected with her and creates a filmic environment that necessitates embodied spectatorship.

Figure 17 – After revisiting the *faiseuse d'anges* for a dangerous follow-up procedure, Anne's health rapidly declines and she is sent to the hospital

One of the more noticeable style choices on Diwan's behalf was the decision to segment the film's "relentless chronological structure" into weeks, reflecting the same way that OBGYNs measure the growth of a fetus by overlaying small, typed-out time stamps to mark the passage of time (Smyth 44). The first time stamp (*3 semaines*) indicates that three weeks have passed since conception, and as the film goes on, these daunting reminders continue to fade in and out, weekly at first, then skipping two or three weeks in between as the window of time appears to shrink more and more. While the use of weekly checkpoints can be an exciting way for women who wish to be pregnant to keep track of their progress, here it is instead a stressful reminder that something is growing inside of her that she does not wish to keep, something that transforms her body and slowly turns it into something unrecognizable even to her. These subtle on-screen captions counting the passing weeks create a heightened sense of urgency, a ticking time bomb constantly reminding Anne that if she doesn't act immediately, she might be too late to change her fate. The deliberate choice to space out the film in this way—to count up rather than count down as if the fetus inside was pushing out all other opportunities as it grew and grew—impregnates the audience with the same nauseating stress that Anne is subjected to, and incites a corporeal, embodied reaction to this rapidly snowballing conflict.

Finally, another element that adds to the anxiety of the situation is the choice of music throughout the film. For a majority of the piece, all that we are granted are the sights and sounds of Anne's immediate surroundings, which the filmmakers cleverly chose to mute ever so slightly whenever Anne would zone out and not pay attention. However, a handful of scenes do in fact feature some non-diegetic instrumentals, and they are rarely pleasant tunes. The long, sustained brass tones and the slow, repeated notes from the piano and the

strings mimic the sound of a stopwatch, creating an atmosphere that is characterized by suspense and disquietude, and in the more intense scenes when Anne's health begins to wobble and bend, so too do the notes. Each of these stylistic choices work to amplify the intensity of the situation and to drag audiences into the same isolated space that Anne is pushed into, and from the varying critiques and reviews of the film that have come out since its release, it is evident that this was not an enjoyable experience in the least.

4.2 Harrowing, Devastating, Horrifying

Given the relatively recent production and distribution of this film, there are still few peer-reviewed academic texts that explicitly address *L'événement* in circulation at present. However, there is a wide array of professional critiques and reviews of the film along with some interviews here and there that collectively offer a glimpse into how the film was made as well as how it was received by audiences worldwide. What I found most intriguing when reading these reactions to the film was the choice of language used to describe the viewing experience itself, particularly in reference to the two abortion attempts that are shown on screen.

Figure 18 – Anne takes matters into her own hands and tries to perform a clandestine abortion on the floor at home

In the first scene, Anne attempts to induce a miscarriage at her parent's house using just a lamp, a handheld mirror, and a knitting needle sterilized with a lighter. In the beginning, the camera follows Anne around the room as she gathers her supplies and prepares her workstation (Figure 18). The camera pans up to Anne's face seconds before the music cuts and she inserts the needle, providing ample time for the anxiety of the procedure to fully sink into the skin of the audience. Opting for a continuous close-up shot of Anne's twisting face as she undergoes this self-inflicted but unfortunately necessary pain, viewers are trapped in both time and space, momentarily forced to share this experience from an uncomfortably close angle. The second abortion attempt offers little respite. On the top floor of a random backstreet apartment, a location shared exclusively through late-night whispers and cold, short phone calls, Anne seeks the expensive and dangerous services of a grim and gravel-voiced woman operating as a *faiseuse d'anges* (angel-maker). In this dimly lit space that was designed not for medicine but for dwelling, with tea kettles for sterilization and walls too thin to mask one's scream, it is easy to feel

as if we (the audience forced to accompany Anne wherever she goes) should not be here, as if we should not be participating in these acts in this particular space. In spite of the unsettling circumstances, the scene plays out in real time, allowing audiences to feel the full weight of the situation, to drown in the heavy silence, and to subconsciously become more aware of our own bodies as we attempt to escape the awkwardness radiating off the screen. With the camera positioned once again just above Anne's shoulder and our perspective guided to match that of hers, the scene almost feels as though we ourselves are getting an abortion and silence is enforced upon us as well (Figure 19). This is perhaps what lends itself the most to the accompanying desire to flinch or squirm while watching, a sentiment shared by many as can be seen in the various critiques and reviews that followed the film's release.

Figure 19 – The *faiseuse d'anges* sets Anne up in the bedroom, warning her not to make a single sound or she will end the procedure prematurely

In response to these unyielding depictions of abortion that leave little to the imagination, some critics and reviewers opted for vocabulary such as

"harrowing…urgent… devastating… horrifying…" while others claimed that the entire film was "brutally honest and sometimes a tough watch…" referring to these scenes in particular as "unbearably intense and visceral watch through-your-fingers moments…" (Chossat, Ide, Rooney, Smyth). These words and phrases, while used in an attempt to describe their experience watching an abortion take place, are eerily reminiscent of the vocabulary used to describe horror film screenings, invoking a rhetoric of fear and perhaps even trauma which points to a deeper, subconscious apprehension towards the female body that is rooted in sociocultural gender constructs.

Figure 20 – In attempting to circumvent the law, Anne puts herself through immense pain and exposes herself to a number of dangerous possibilities

Too often the female body is painted as a monstrous being of sorts—purging blood on a regimented schedule, growing other beings inside—and we are taught from a very young age to keep these parts of our bodies hidden, to be ashamed of them. In her majorly influential work titled *Le deuxième sexe* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir explored the origins of internalized gender constructs, pointing out that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a

woman" through social interaction and education (13). In the early stages of development, de Beauvoir argues that anatomical differences represent the primary point of departure, with the presence or absence of a penis serving as justification for both allocation of power and delegation of shame. She goes on to address internalized perceptions of our own bodies as women, citing that:

> "The great privilege for the boy is that, gifted with an organ that can be seen and grasped, he can at least partially alienate himself from it. The mysteries of his body, its threats, he projects outside himself, which enables him to keep them at bay: [the] danger of his penis... is a fear easier to overcome than the vague fear felt by the little girl with regard to her "insides", a fear that often perpetuates itself throughout her life as a woman. She is extremely preoccupied with everything that goes on inside her, and from the start she is much more opaque to her own eyes, more deeply involved in the mysterious complexity of life, than the male" (de Beauvoir 26).

Here, de Beauvoir highlights the nebulous fear that accompanies the possession of internalized organs, a fear which, at least in the context of social power dynamics, extends also to the minds of those without a female anatomy. To explain it rudimentarily, there is a belief across numerous modern societies that to see and know something is to control it, and so when something is unseen and unknowable, it poses a threat of indeterminable size to those in positions of power. Rather than allowing the unknowable thing to speak or act freely and potentially seize said power, the only alternative is to restrain it, to impose shame and fear upon it in hopes that it will never attempt to spread its wings. This surveillance technique has been applied to female bodies for centuries, with the "opaque" mystery of its various functions and ailments serving as justification for the imposed sense of

unbelonging and "otherness" (de Beauvoir). The entire female body is thus relegated to the private sphere, with no room for negotiation as this has been normalized and perpetuated generation after generation. And so, when an integral but frequently hidden part of the embodied female experience such as an abortion or a miscarriage is depicted on screen in such an incredibly visual and immersive way, it is difficult to look past the immediate response of shock, fear, and embarrassment (Figure 20). The striking vocabulary used in critiques and reviews of *L'événement* calls attention to our collective and subconscious fear of the female body, and points to a gap in mainstream media that warrants greater representation of feminine bodily processes both in film and in conversation.

Figure 21 – Anne's friends shudder at the very mention of unwanted pregnancies

In addition to the fearful language, one other commonality that I found across almost every review was a steady spotlight on the film's very 'timeless' nature, the word *timeless* being applied here in part because the film was released at a time when many Western countries, including the United States, were facing rising concerns about the precariousness of their own abortion legislation. J.E. Smyth writes in *Cinéaste*:

> "Normally if I write the word "timeless," it's a lazy compliment to the filmmaker/writer and shorthand for "enduringly popular." It does not mean that here. [*L'événement*]'s timeless quality is an indictment of what happened and continues to happen just about anywhere" (Smyth 43).

Reviewers also used the word *timeless* to address the ways in which the set, prop, and costume departments attempted to portray a story that is set in the 1960s but doesn't exhibit any wildly telling features. For example, Wendy Ide claims that:

> "The uncomfortable timeliness of the film is emphasized by Diwan's decision to make sure that, although the story unfolds in the 1960s, the film doesn't feel anchored in the past by heavily styled costumes and production design" (Ide 1).

The film's minimalist production creates an atmosphere of simplicity, opting to forgo the telltale signs of a period piece trying to contextualize itself (fashion, pop culture, industry), and presents audiences with a stripped-down perspective of a character and her immediate surroundings (Figure 21). In other contexts, this level of straightforwardness might come off as refreshing, peaceful even, but when it is accompanied by the underlying knowledge that the conflicts of this film could very well happen to yourself or someone you know at any point in time, the simplicity becomes a stressful reminder that the fight is not over. Indeed, the universality and the timelessness of this narrative—one of a young woman struggling for control over her own body— calls to attention the modern injustices that women around the world continue to face to this day.

Figure 22 – Alone and in pain, Anne finally gets rid of the fetus she's been carrying for twelve weeks now

Audrey Diwan's film works to portray the physical, social, and psychological toll that seeking abortion can take on a young woman in a time and place where the procedure is (very publicly) outlawed (Figure 22). Of the three films, the abortion depicted in *L'événement* is widely known as the most corporeal and it has frequently been cited as difficult to watch. However, moving past the initial gut reaction to look away, this visceral and embodied portrayal of abortion in this film plays an important role in enlightening audiences on the all-encompassing reality of the embodied female experience, and calls attention to the suffocating solitude of womanhood brought on by the criminalization of feminine bodies and the confiscation of their voices.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have address three different filmic representations of abortion in French-language cinema that each approach the subject in their own, unique way. *L'une chante, l'autre pas* painted an ethereal and comforting portrait of unapologetic femininity and explored a world in which women talk about their bodies freely and without shame, all set against the lively backdrop of the Women's Movement in 1970s France. As I have demonstrated, Agnès Varda's film blurs the lines of reality through its unique combination of documentary and fiction and incites embodied spectatorship through the practice of subjective inclusion, demonstrating the necessity for community amongst women especially within the context of reproductive healthcare. *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* presented us with yet another illustration based on equality, space, and sisterhood. This film showed audiences the power that looking truly holds, and emphasized the importance of memory and legacy through art. I argued that the film's unique approach to different elements of the embodied female experience such as abortion and menstruation both grounded the bodies in their earthly existence and underlined the normalcy of bodily functions as women have been experiencing them for millennia. *L'événement* drew a picture of urgency and solitude, highlighting the difficult reality of living in a time and space where simply having a birthing body can feel like a crime in and of itself. I demonstrated that through an innovative use of close-up camerawork and haptic imagery, this film unlocks a new level of embodied spectatorship which, paired with unyielding representations of abortion on screen, forces audiences to reconcile with their own preconceptions of the female body. Shown from a uniquely feminine perspective, abortion

as seen in these three French films works to de-sensationalize the female body in the world of cinema and opens conversations about reproductive healthcare in the world outside of it. Each of these films offer nuanced and embodied depictions of bodily experiences that have long been marginalized and suppressed to practical nonexistence, at least in the public sphere. Through their work, Agnès Varda, Céline Sciamma, and Audrey Diwan each underline the extremely isolating circumstance of having a body that lives and breathes in a society that explicitly told it not to. The embodied female experience is something that deserves to be in conversation as well as in art without the complicated hierarchy of subject vs. object or artist vs. muse, and only then can modern societies begin to approach a future where they truly value the experiences of everyone, regardless of their flesh.

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